

CPYRGHT



Saigon Puzzle

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Washington.

It often seems that all we have succeeded in doing in South-east Asia is exporting the jurisdictional and policy conflicts of the Washington bureaucracy.

The President's advisers at the White House, the career men in the State Dept., the military officers in the Pentagon and the CIA men, popularly known as "the spooks," struggle constantly under every administration to get control of policy. The conflicts are particularly acute regarding countries such as Cuba and South Vietnam where the situation is going badly for our side. Naturally, policies that are encountering heavy weather come under frequent review and the rival agencies try to push their own plans for getting the job done more effectively.

All this does not make for easy reporting. One cannot generalize about American policy when the policymakers themselves are divided. Moreover, reporters often have to write in a muffled style to protect their sources. Thus, this past Wednesday there were stories out of Washington that the Kennedy Administration could see no reasonable alternative to President Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam and had decided to reaffirm support for him.

These stories reflected accurately the views of Ambassador Frederick E. Nolting Jr. as he expressed them in off-the-record conversations during his recent visit here. Because reporters learned Nolting's views under circumstances that did not permit them to attribute those views to him, they had to ascribe them to "official sources" or "Washington opinion."

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But are Nolting's views the same as those of the entire Administration?

The answer is that they are not. There are officials just as highly placed in the Kennedy Administration and whose identities cannot be disclosed (yes, anonymity must descend again) who are actively considering the possibilities of getting an alternative to President Diem. Nolting, who will be replaced in the fall by Henry Cabot Lodge, has become another classic example of an ambassador who becomes the prisoner of the government to which he is accredited. When he was sent out to Vietnam two years ago, Nolting was regarded as an excellent choice, able, articulate, independent-minded career officer.

The terrible strains and conflicts in Saigon (and these can scarcely be underestimated) proved too much for him. He wound up President Diem's ambassador to us rather than our ambassador to him. His worst failing was his decision to go along with Diem's policy of permitting nothing but optimistic propaganda about the course of the war against the Communists. In fact, the war has been going badly. Government forces have not suffered defeats in battle, but the Communist forces have heavily infiltrated areas under Diem's control. Their shadow government in many villages has more authority than his nominal, daytime government.

In recent months, Nolting and Diem have almost vied with one another in issuing optimistic statements and predictions. A sensible American policy would instead proceed on the correct assumption that the outlook is grave but perhaps not hopeless.

Again, in extenuation of Nolting's public statements, he has at times been under pressure from Washington to demonstrate the power of positive thinking.

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In shopping for alternatives to Diem, however, one quickly comes back to the serious rivalries and conflicts among the American agencies of government, both in Washington and in Saigon. More than one high official who would like to use American influence actively to ease out Diem is restrained from recommending such a policy because of his distrust of the CIA. If given the word, the "spooks" could do a lot to make Diem's position untenable. But the difficulty is that they horribly botched the job of developing a political alternative to Castro within the Cuban exile movement. Might they not repeat their performance in Vietnam and come up with a successor who is even worse and less popular than Diem?

The lack of confidence between the White House and the State Dept., on the one side, and the CIA on the other is one of the most burdensome handicaps under which our government labors in foreign affairs.

Then there are the generals. We already have 14,000 U. S. troops as advisers and training instructors in South Vietnam. Occasionally, these soldiers act on the principle that the most efficient way of teaching the Vietnamese how to fight is to go into combat with them. There is a school of thought among some American Army men that we could break the power of the Communist guerrillas if we put in two U. S. divisions and engaged the fighting more openly and vigorously. Military men are naturally prone to think of military solutions to difficult problems.

American military officers in the field are also naturally angry and frustrated when Diem's mishandling of the Buddhist question and his political manipulation of the officers in his own army undercuts their work. They put the blame on the diplomats and political policymakers.

What is President Kennedy going to do with this problem? Diem cannot be reformed or reasoned with and is beyond saving. Our program in South Vietnam needs major changes. Mr. Kennedy has handicapped himself by the politically expedient but most unwise choice of Cabot Lodge as his new ambassador. A major disaster may be in the making.